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Davis, Charles Henry

National highways for the farmer vs. ‘radiating...

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Reprint from the April Banker-Farmer, Champaign, Illinois

"I'LL BE BACK TONIGHT" "I'LL BE BACK IN AN HOUR"

308
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Box 307

National Highways for the Farmer vs. 'Radiating Roads.'

By Charles Henry Davis, C. E.

(*President National Highways Association, Washington, D. C.*)

AT the outset of any talk on the Good Roads problem of this country as it affects the farmer there are two things that we can safely assume. One is the social and economic importance of good roads. The other is the necessity of the government's taking a hand in road building.

In the last three years no less than 140 bills proposing national legislation have been introduced in the House and Senate. The substance of all these bills simmers down to two general plans. One is for a system of National Highways. The term "Federal aid" is applied more or less locally to all methods though it cannot properly be used when we are discussing out-and-out National Highways. The other plan is that of Federal aid for the development of what may be called radiating roads, by which is meant roads radiating out from the towns and railroad stations to the farms that supply the markets with produce and the railroads with freight.

Ask almost any farmer who has not given much thought to the subject which plan he thinks would help him most and he is likely to say without hesitation, "Why, Federal aid for radiating roads, of course. They are the only kind of roads that will do us any good. We don't want boulevards across the continent for joy riding. What we want is roads that will enable us to get our produce to market". Is it possible to devise a plan of this kind that will really benefit the farmer? Let us look into the plan a little.

Suppose Congress should appropriate $50,000,000. If that amount was distributed equally each state would receive about a million dollars. How far would that develop radiating roads in a state like Missouri, of average size, and of average density of population? Each county could build four-fifths of a mile of hard surfaced road a year, assuming $10,000 as the average cost of a mile of hard roads. Suppose now that the railroad station is taken as the hub, and that the money is to be spent on the roads radiating from it out into the country. Missouri has an average of ten railroad

stations to each county. If each county could build four-fifths of a mile of road with its share of a $50,000,000 appropriation, and if all the stations were treated equally each would annually get two-twenty-fifths of a mile of road, or 211 feet. Thus to get one mile of road built in one direction from each railroad station would take twelve and one-half years, and fifty years to build out one mile in each direction from each station. How much would the farmers around a railroad station profit by one mile of road after waiting fifty years for it. In Missouri the average length of haul by wagon is nine miles. To improve only one of the roads from the railroad station for a distance of nine miles would take 112 years. To improve all four radiating roads the same distance would take 448 years: Obviously such a plan of Federal aid is impossible.

Equally futile is the plan to confine the spending of national appropriations to Post Roads. To get back to Missouri once more: in Jackson county's system of free delivery routes there are forty-seven "dead ends"—roads that leave the main roads and lead up to some farmhouse. These dead ends are from one-quarter to a mile or more long, and are a part of the roads classified as Post Roads. If Jackson county's share of the National appropriation should be spent exclusively on dead ends and should be divided impartially among them, each dead end would get about ninety feet of hard road a year. Assuming that the average length of a dead end is half a mile it would take twenty-nine years before there would be a hard road from each farmhouse to the main road. It is doubtful if all the ends would be completed even in that time.

Is it necessary to say more to show the impracticability of Federal aid for radiating roads, whether they radiate out from the market or railroad station or radiate in from the farms?

Experience with other kinds of aid—County aid and State aid—has shown the ineffectiveness of them unless the aid supplements a well devised system of state highways built and maintained by state funds. When you begin to divide the authority and responsibility between local officials and county or state officials you get into trouble. In nine cases out of ten the money is not spent to the best advantage.

Now National Highways would do more for the farmer in one year than Federal aid for radiating roads would do in twenty years. Do not be deceived as to their nature and purpose. The National Highways Association is working not for great boulevards on which rich motorists can speed from coast to coast, but for common everyday roads for the working farmer.

The system of fifty thousand miles of National Highways which this Association proposes that the government should build has been devised with painstaking care. The roads that have been selected are those that are the most traveled and bear the heaviest traffic. They are either the best existing roads from place to place or the best available routes to be improved. In almost all cases the roads that have been chosen are those that have been suggested by the state road officials. It is of vital importance that in entering the road building movement the government adopts a National Highway system instead of trying to give aid to develop the local roads first.

Though this fifty thousand mile system includes only 2½% of our total road mileage it embraces all the important routes and will carry one-half of the road tonnage of the United States. It will directly serve 60,586,347 people living in the counties through which the highways pass. It will be of only slightly less service to the 24,303,626 people who form the population of the counties abutting on those directly served. In other words, the system will actually serve 84,899,973 people or 92% of the whole population of the United States. To build this system would cost less than five hundred million dollars—not much more than the Panama Canal has cost. Spread over a period of ten years the work could be easily financed. But even if it cost far more the returns to the farmer would make it worth building. It would increase land values along the highways by $600,000,000. It would reduce the wear and tear on vehicles by $250,000,000 a year. It would provide satisfactory employment for thousands of workmen. It would increase the prosperity of the farmer and of the farmer's bank. It would provide better social conditions in the rural districts, make farm life more attractive, check migration to the cities, increase attendance at country schools, and reduce illiteracy.

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